

Today we have gathered here in Immanuel's sanctuary in the presence of God to mourn the loss and to celebrate the life of Ella Berg. Each one of us has come here today with a variety of memories and stories about Ella. We bring memories and stories which we've shared with one another the past few days, stories which help all of us remember those things which were unique to Ella and made her who she was.

You also bring memories and emotions that you will never really be able to truly share, because you hold them from the unique position of the relationship that you had with Ella. You hold memories of Ella as mom, grandma, great-grandma, neighbor, friend, and sister in Christ. The feelings that you have for Ella in those relationships are feelings that are unique to you, feelings that might never be fully expressed in words. Today, we all come in the presence of the Triune God with a variety of feelings..... loss and sorrow...maybe some laughter through the tears...sadness, yet gladness. Of course we are sad. We are sad because we are going to miss Ella, now that she has died. But in the midst of our sadness and our tears, we are glad. We are glad with joy, because we know that even though Ella has died in this world, she lives on, because she is with Jesus, the Son of God, the Risen One who promises forgiveness and love and mercy and grace and eternal life to all who believe in him.

As Ella's pastor, I'd like to share a few of my own memories of Ella with you that I know I will remember for many years to come. In case you don't know, I was here at Immanuel from August 2005 to July 2006 as Immanuel's Vicar as I was completing my year of internship while I was studying to become a pastor. Then I went back to grad school at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, for a year, and then I was called back here to be Immanuel's pastor starting last July.

During the first few months of my internship, back in 2005, I met Ella for the first time. I went over to her house on Main Street in Winside, and wouldn't you know it, on that first visit, there was something wrong with her hearing aid. Leroy and her had tried to fix it before I got there, but they had no luck. And that was okay. I just had to talk a little bit louder, which isn't a problem for me. And as we were getting to know each other on that first visit, I came to find out that she couldn't see as clearly

as she used to, and also her hearing wasn't as good as it once was. And I, being the new Vicar on the scene, had said something to her like, "So you can't see or hear very well. Is there anything else you have trouble with?" Ella thought for a moment and then said something like, "No, I suppose besides that, I'm doing pretty good," she said as she smiled.

Every time I visited with Ella, she always had a smile on a her face. She and I, we both looked forward to visiting with one another, because we shared the common bond of our Lord Jesus Christ. As we visited with one another, Jesus was with us. We would talk about all sorts of things. She'd catch me up on the new things that she knew about, and I'd catch her up on all the news that was going on over here at Immanuel and in Madison.

Just this past December, one week before Christmas, I was able to visit with Ella in her home, which was the last time we got to visit together in Winside. During that visit, I asked Ella if I could do something that I had never done for her before. I asked if I could sing and play some Christmas songs for her on my guitar. The lover of music that she was, Ella enthusiastically said "Yes." So I went out to my car and brought my guitar back in, and I played all sorts of Christmas hymns for her, and that ever-present smile on her face just shined like the star that hung over the manger in which our Lord Jesus was born.

The last time I saw Ella alive was over at the Golden Living Center on February 19. At the time when I showed up that day, Eileen was there, too, having shown up just a few minutes before me. Ella had pretty much lost her voice that day, but she hadn't lost her love for her pastor. That day, Ella kept asking me for something that she had never asked for before. She kept asking me for a hug, and so I gave her as many as she asked for. I also gave Ella and Eileen communion that day.

Every time I visited with Ella, whether it was in Winside, and even during that last visit at Golden Living Center, we would always share in the Lord's Supper. I would share the bread and wine of Holy Communion with Ella, so that she might know and remember that her Lord and Savior Jesus Christ loves her and loves the entire world so much that Jesus gave up his body and his blood on the cross so

that all of our sins would be forgiven, and so that we might live in the presence of the Triune God forever, both in this life, and in the life to come. In our visits, Ella heard the Word of God proclaimed, and she ate and drank that Word of God, and that Word of God filled Ella's heart. Although she might not have been able to see or hear as well as she used to in the last years of life, in her heart, Ella had heard God calling her. Although she couldn't clearly see *me*, I know that she clearly saw who Jesus is, because she saw him with her faith. With her faith, she saw Jesus and she trusted Jesus, because she knew that Jesus is the Lord. And Ella knew that the Lord is her shepherd, and as her shepherd, Jesus would never leave her alone, and he would never leave her wanting more.

Eileen shared with me, that as Ella was lying on her death bed, Eileen was saying the 23rd Psalm aloud. And although Ella wasn't able to say it along with her, Eileen noticed that Ella was moving her lips, mouthing those same words from the 23rd Psalm right along with her. And if I remember correctly, Eileen told me that she then asked her mom if this was one of her favorite Bible verses, and Ella had nodded yes, yes it was.

We've heard this Psalm read here today. It's a beautiful Psalm of David that shows us who our Lord is to us and how our Lord treats us. Jesus cares for our needs, he feeds us, and he provides rest for us. And even though death and darkness and enemies like Satan may surround us, we know that Jesus will comfort us in the midst of those moments in our lives, because he himself faced death and darkness and Satan on the cross for us. He died for us on the cross, but the story didn't stop there. Although he died for us, Jesus was also raised from the dead, so that we, too, might be raised to new life in him. The Risen Christ calls us to follow him, and when we respond to his call, the end of Psalm 23 tells us how life will be. Psalm 23 says, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Throughout her life, Ella received the good news of Jesus Christ as the amazing grace that it is. Grace is not earned by any sort of hard work. God's grace is a gift; it cannot be bought at any price. God's grace doesn't come to us because of any action that we do. God's grace comes to us because of

what God does. And the thing that God does, is that God loves us. The Triune God loves us a lot. We are loved so much that God the Son, Jesus Christ, dies with us and for us so that we might never die alone, and so that we might live forever in him. In our gospel lesson today, Jesus says, "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going. You know the way, because you know me. I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Ella knew Jesus, and now, she finally gets to see and hear him as clear as a bell. It's like the reading from Job that we've heard today. Ella now, and all of us when we die, we all can say what Job says. He says, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold [him], and not another."

Jesus had been with Ella wherever she went in life, and now, Ella is with Jesus, right where he said she would be. Ella had been moved around to several different dwelling places and rooms the last couple months of her life. She was moved from her home in Winside to the hospital to Golden Living Center and back to the hospital, but now...now she's in the place that our Lord Jesus has prepared for her. She's in one of the rooms in our eternal Father's home, so that she can be with Jesus forever, living out that eternal life that he gives to her.

This is what Ella sees. This is what we are called to believe. As we believe and trust in this promise from God, the Lord will comfort us in our sorrow. God will strengthen us where we are weak. And Jesus will love us forever and give us that gift of eternal life. Where Jesus is, may Ella and may we be there also. Help us to believe and to trust in you, Jesus. We pray this in your holy name. Amen.